
The Global Leader as Boundary Spanner, Bridge Maker, and Blender

CHRISTINA L. BUTLER

Kingston University

LENA ZANDER

Uppsala University

AUDRA MOCKAITIS

Monash University

CIARA SUTTON

Stockholm School of Economics

As Holt and Seki (2012) assert, it is important to develop multicultural competencies, to be at once focused, driven, and people oriented. These are qualities that help a leader to overcome the challenges associated with the paradoxes that are inevitably encountered once work crosses national and cultural boundaries. But how do these qualities help the leader become an effective global leader, and how are

these qualities acquired? We suggest that the cultivation of the qualities required for effective global leadership occurs through the actual simultaneous performance of three unique roles within and across groups: boundary spanner, bridge maker, and blender. We argue that these key leader roles are missing from the global leadership literature but are central to acquiring the essential competencies featured in the focal article.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Christina L. Butler.

E-mail: christina.butler@kingston.ac.uk

Address: Department of Leadership, HRM and Organisation, Kingston Business School, Kingston University, Kingston-upon-Thames, Surrey KT2 7LB, United Kingdom

The Global Leader as Boundary Spanner

Hinds, Liu, and Lyon (2011) argue that the literature on intercultural collaborations,

after many decades, still lacks clarity about how individuals in different countries can actually manage and overcome cultural differences. This is ever more important for global leaders, who work in multiple locations and with people from multiple cultures. Often, they must manage not only within but also across organizations, units, and groups (Harvey & Novicevic, 2004). The literature on global work does not truly take this into account (Hinds et al., 2011). The global leader must leverage the skills, resources, and values of others, as well as one's own social ties in multiple locations, in order to earn the trust of subordinates and effectively lead them to attaining organizational goals. In other words, the global leader must engage in boundary spanning activities.

Boundary spanning leadership is especially important in attaining the intercultural and interpersonal goals that Holt and Seki highlight. It involves establishing and sharing ties between multiple groups to enable the flow of information, knowledge, resources, and people (Ernst & Yip, 2009). Boundary spanning leadership helps to overcome the challenges associated with global leadership paradoxes. According to Au and Fukuda (2002), boundary spanning activities reduce role ambiguity and help balance internal and external pressures as well as the needs of groups and individuals.

Effective boundary spanning leaders overcome not only geographic but also identity-based boundaries and create a third space in which members of different groups interact (Ernst & Yip, 2009). They recognize the contributions of various groups and link them to organizational goals and know the social categories and roles that cut across groups. These demands on boundary spanning global leaders create further paradoxes, but for the boundary spanner they should not be seen as a great challenge. Effective leaders develop multiple social relationships in various locations, for example through global assignments, and establish trust in these relationships (Harvey & Novicevic,

2004). In addition to their repertoire of social ties, boundary spanners also possess the people-oriented qualities that Holt and Seki describe; these assist in locating and tapping information, knowledge, and resources in different communities and facilitating cross-border communication. Importantly, boundary spanners act as "culture brokers" in connecting dispersed people and resources (Au & Fukuda, 2002).

The recognition of opportunities and having social ties in different locations are certainly necessary but not enough to categorize the leader as effective and/or global. The effective global leader needs to leverage the social capital and knowledge from both near and far-flung locations in addition to understanding and garnering the positive from diverse national cultural values and other forms of diversity. Hence, the boundary spanning leader must also act as a bridge maker and blender.

The Global Leader as Bridge Maker

Global leaders also need to act as bridge makers among people within multicultural groupings of employees, for example, cultural and functional cross-cutting top management teams, international virtual, or face-to-face projects, as well as merger and acquisition integration task forces. Cultural bridge maker is not yet a widely used concept in global leadership research, but it is gaining recognition in education, law, and medical studies (Liljgren & Zander, 2011). To Abreu and Peloquin (2004), bridge makers engage in activities and discussions that foster understanding, interdependence, dialogue, and cohesion as they recognize the value of cultural diversity and encourage deeper views of culture. Although culturally knowledgeable, effective bridge makers refrain from sophisticated stereotyping (Osland, Bird, Delano, & Jacob, 2000). Instead, they become skilled at recognizing individuals' uniqueness in the midst of cultural categorizing while noting *de facto* cultural patterns when these are present in

individuals' action and behavior. The role of a bridge maker thus entails more than just "simple" cultural translations. When acting within groups, the important task is to bridge across team members' cultural, linguistic, and national differences so that member-to-member communication is effective, organization of work becomes productive, and outcomes are positive and creative.

When the global leader is the formal head, with operational responsibility of, for example, a multicultural team, he or she will need bridge making skills to specifically manage what Maznevski and Zander (2001) coined the "power paradox." A power paradox occurs when a leader leads a multicultural team and manages the work process in a way that is preferred by some of the members, while precisely the same set of behaviors is found by others to display a lack of leader competence and authority, for example, delegation of authority as "empowering" versus being "weak and indecisive." The global leader will not only experience the need for bridge making skills to overcome the power paradox and retain leadership authority when leading multicultural teams but equally so when being in charge of other multicultural groupings of employees such as starting a joint venture or other sorts of strategic alliances together with one or more cross-border partners. Furthermore, bridge makers also have a role to play in the workplace more generally, which is increasingly and speedily becoming a diverse reality for many organizations with multicultural groupings or work teams in place.

The Global Leader as Blender

We have seen above the need for global leaders to enact boundary spanning and bridge making; they also enact a third role as that of blender inside the now commonly employed global work teams. Truly multicultural teams, teams that are highly heterogeneous in terms of demographic characteristics, tend to perform

better than those that are highly homogeneous (Earley & Mosakowski, 2000) especially where creative decision making is concerned (McLeod & Lobel, 1992). Many teams though fall between those poles and are therefore comprised of one, two, or even more subgroups or splits. They might best be characterized as "in-between" multicultural teams (Butler, 2010). Such challenging but nevertheless commonplace multicultural teams have difficulty in overcoming their inherent national cultural faultlines (Lau & Murnighan, 1998) to develop the necessary positive "hybrid" culture (Earley & Mosakowski, 2000) and collective identity (Conger, Kanungo, & Menon, 2000) to promote creative decision making. An "in-between" team thus requires a global leader who can blend its culturally diverse collection of individuals into a high-functioning team.

A cultural blender is not a label that has been used previously in the global leadership literature, although the idea has been alluded to in other work, such as that by Janssens and Brett (2006) on cultural fusion. A blend can be understood as a strong new "whole," which nevertheless retains the clear individual elements of which that whole is comprised, such as the sound blends found in language (e.g., "str" in "strategy"). The global leader, in his or her role as blender, simultaneously focuses on satisfying each individual team member's need for belonging and need for uniqueness (Shore et al., 2011). Although maintaining the optimal distinctiveness (Brewer, 1991) of individuals is now well-recognized, achieving it within a global team setting requires the development of considerable global leadership skill and may be exercised by either a formal or informal leader. A skillful blender simultaneously maintains a group-level focus on some elements, such as developing a superordinate goal, to increase belonging and decrease dislike (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000), and an individual-level focus on others, such as developing separate relationships with each individual team member and

each distinct subgroup, to retain uniqueness (Hewstone & Brown, 1986) and increase liking (Pittinsky, 2010). The role of the cultural blender is not simply about achieving multicultural effectiveness and appreciating individual uniqueness. It requires the active cultivation of the ability to “be” with both the team as a whole (e.g., to decrease dislike) and each team member as an individual (e.g., to increase liking).

Concluding Reflection

In our challenging world, global leaders can easily find themselves in a metaparadoxical moment 22-type situation where they need the cultural awareness and competences Holt and Seki prescribe to manage cultural paradoxes and carry out their global leadership roles, but the actual carrying out of these roles is what in essence develops the sought-after global leadership qualities and competences. We propose the enactment of three global leadership roles—boundary spanning, bridge making, and blending—as a way forward for global leaders.

References

- Abreu, B., & Peloquin, S. (2004). The issue is: Embracing diversity in our profession. *The American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 58, 353–359.
- Au, K., & Fukuda, J. (2002). Boundary spanning behaviors of expatriates. *Journal of World Business*, 37, 285–296.
- Brewer, M. (1991). The social self: On being the same and different at the same time. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 17, 475–482.
- Butler, C. (2010). The challenge of the ‘in-between’ multinational team: Is a bicultural leader the answer? Academy of Management Annual Meeting, August 6–10, Montreal, Canada.
- Conger, J., Kanungo, R., & Menon, S. (2000). Charismatic leadership and follower effects. *Journal of Organizational Behaviour*, 21, 747–767.
- Earley, P., & Mosakowski, E. (2000). Creating hybrid team cultures: An empirical test of transnational team functioning. *Academy of Management Journal*, 43, 26–49.
- Ernst, C., & Yip, J. (2009). Boundary spanning leadership: Tactics for bridging social boundaries in organization. In T. Pittinsky (Ed.), *Crossing the divide: Intergroup leadership in a world of difference*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Harvey, M., & Novicevic, M. (2004). The development of political skill and political capital by global leaders through global assignments. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 15, 1173–1188.
- Hewstone, M., & Brown, R. (1986). Contact is not enough: An intergroup perspective. In M. Hewstone, & R. Brown (Eds.), *Contact and conflict in intergroup encounters* (pp. 1–44). Oxford, England: Blackwell.
- Hinds, P., Liu, L., & Lyon, J. (2011). *Putting the global in global work: An intercultural lens on the practice of cross-national collaboration*. *The Academy of Management Annals*, 5, 135–188.
- Holt, K., & Seki, K. (2012). Global leadership: A developmental shift for everyone. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice*, 5, 198–217.
- Hornsey, M., & Hogg, M. (2000). Assimilation and diversity: An integrative model of subgroup relations. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 4, 143–156.
- Janssens, M., & Brett, J. (2006). Cultural intelligence in global teams: A fusion model of collaboration. *Groups & Organization Management*, 31, 124–150.
- Lau, D., & Murnighan, J. (1998). Demographic diversity and faultlines: The compositional dynamics of organizational groups. *Academy of Management Review*, 23, 325–340.
- Liljegren, S., & Zander, L. (2011, August). *The importance of being a bridge maker: Power and influence in international and multicultural boards of directors*. Paper presented at the Academy of Management annual meeting, San Antonio, USA.
- McLeod, P., & Lobel, S. (1992). *The effects of ethnic diversity on idea generation in small groups*. Columbia, SC: Academy of Management Best Paper Proceedings.
- Maznevski, M., & Zander, L. (2001). Leading global teams: Overcoming the challenge of power paradoxes. In M. Medenhall, T. Kuehlmann, & G. Stahl (Eds.), *Developing global business leaders: Policies, processes, and innovations*. Westport, CT: Quorum.
- Osland, J. S., Bird, A., Delano, J., & Jacob, M. (2000). Beyond sophisticated stereotyping: Cultural sense-making in context. *Academy of Management Executives*, 14, 65–79.
- Pittinsky, T. (2010). A two-dimensional model of intergroup leadership. *American Psychologist*, 65, 194–200.
- Shore, L., Randel, A., Chung, B., Dean, M., Ehrhart, K., & Singh, G. (2011). Inclusion and diversity in work groups: A review and model for future research. *Journal of Management*, 37, 1262–1289.